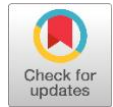


Learning-by-doing and traditional instruction in hospitality ESP: A quasi-experimental comparison

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the effectiveness of a learning-by-doing methodology against traditional classroom-based instruction in ESP training for hospitality employees. A non-equivalent-group quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test design was implemented with 36 Food and Beverage staff members (B1 CEFR level) from a hotel chain operating in Gran Canaria, La Palma, Tenerife, and Fuerteventura (Canary Islands), allocated to a traditional instruction group (n = 18) or a learning-by-doing group (n = 18) based on staff availability. Both groups completed a 12-hour intervention delivered over three days. Performance was assessed using a researcher-developed 30-item written knowledge and situational-judgement test administered before and after the intervention. Given a significant baseline imbalance between groups, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to compare post-test scores while controlling for pre-test performance. The learning-by-doing group achieved a higher unadjusted post-test score than the traditional group (6.91 ± 1.83 vs. 4.83 ± 2.45 , $p = 0.0069$, $d = 0.64$); however, after adjusting for baseline differences, the between-group difference was no longer statistically significant (adjusted difference = 0.43, 95% CI [-0.73, 1.58], $p = 0.459$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.017$), and absolute change scores were comparable between groups (2.23 vs. 2.46 points, $p = 0.6585$). These findings offer preliminary, context-specific support for the potential benefits of experiential instruction in hospitality ESP, while underscoring the need for larger, better-balanced samples and direct observation of workplace performance before firm pedagogical recommendations can be made.



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1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged as a core field within applied linguistics to address the specialized language needs of experts across diverse industries. With the increasing influence of globalization on professional environments, the need for specialized language learning that fills the gap between general English language skills and professional communication skills has become more pressing (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). ESP programs are developed to cater to the linguistic needs of learners in their professional lives, moving away from conventional language teaching methods and emphasizing the authentic language needs of specialized areas (Anthony, 2018).

The hospitality industry may be viewed as an interesting context in which English communication skills are essential. Hotel staff members are required to deal with various complex interpersonal interactions, address customer complaints, communicate detailed information regarding hotel services,

and work with other staff members of various international backgrounds (Yamin, 2021; Sabari Sankar & Aravind, 2026; Shikder *et al.*, 2026). This complex context requires specific language skills that go beyond general English communication skills, hence the need to develop specific ESP programs for hotel staff.

In most cases, ESP instruction has focused on the traditional classroom-based approach, where textbooks, role-playing, and scenarios are used to equip students with appropriate knowledge for professional communication (Hyland, 2022; Tran *et al.*, 2025; Musayeva, 2026). In this study, the traditional method refers to classroom-based instruction relying on textbooks, structured role-play, and scripted scenarios delivered in a fixed classroom setting, without direct exposure to live guest interactions. Though this approach has shown significant effectiveness in helping students develop basic knowledge and understanding of genre-specific language, it has also shown limitations in helping students cope with the realities of workplace interactions, which are naturally unpredictable (Thongphut & Kaur, 2023). The traditional classroom setting may not be able to simulate the dynamic nature of hotel workers' daily activities, which are naturally very demanding.

In contrast, the learning-by-doing method — guided by experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) — refers to structured on-the-job training in which staff engage directly with real guests and workplace tasks under supervision, receiving feedback based on authentic performance rather than simulated exercises. This approach focuses on direct engagement with authentic tasks and real-world problem-solving, aligning with constructivist learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), in which the learner constructs knowledge through participation in authentic experiences. For ESP learners, the learning-by-doing approach may include authentic workplace simulations, internships, or interactions with native speakers in the workplace (Belcher, 2004), providing learners with more meaningful learning opportunities directly linked to the application of language.

Recent ESP research has examined instructional approaches across various professional fields, though few studies offer a direct comparison between traditional and experiential methods. Hsu *et al.* (2025) investigated the impact of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in ESP courses for Chilean engineering students, reporting improvements in linguistic and technical communication skills; however, this study did not include a comparison group and therefore cannot establish the relative effectiveness of PBL against traditional instruction. Similarly, Arnó-Macià and Aguilar-Pérez (2022) examined the role of ESP within university internationalization policies through students' self-reported perceptions but did not assess comparative learning outcomes between instructional methods. The clearest direct comparisons to date come from Mesbah (2016) and, more recently, Noroozi and Taheri (2022) and Nasir (2025), who used quasi-experimental designs to compare task-based instruction with more traditional methods (Grammar-Translation Method, Present-Practice-Produce, and conventional grammar-based instruction, respectively), consistently finding advantages for Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) — in reading comprehension, authentic language use, and overall communicative competence. While these studies provide valuable experimental evidence, their focus on general EFL and academic contexts leaves open the question of whether similar advantages of experiential approaches extend to the oral, interactional, and service-oriented communication demands characteristic of the hospitality industry. A synthesis of current research thus reveals a clear divide: existing literature either relies on non-comparative descriptive frameworks or evaluates comparative methodologies in academic, general-EFL, or non-interactive contexts, none of which directly addresses the hospitality-specific communicative demands central to this study.

The specific nature of the hospitality industry makes it an ideal context for exploring the relative effectiveness of the learning-by-doing approach, because the day-to-day functioning of a hotel requires constant and immediate communication, problem resolution, and customer service interactions — all of which could potentially be improved through the application of experiential learning (Kay & Parsons, 2019; May García, 2025; Saragih *et al.*, 2026).

The assessment of language knowledge and skills in ESP has traditionally centered on specific language skills and knowledge of specialized vocabulary and genres (Douglas, 2014). Nevertheless, as emphasized by Knoch and Macqueen (2020), there is a growing understanding of the need to develop more authentic forms of assessment that recognize the integrative nature of communication in the workplace. The use of performance-based assessments that simulate authentic work situations may yield more accurate measures of learners' ability to interact successfully in their professional environments, especially when evaluating the effectiveness of different instructional methodologies.

Despite the theoretical benefits of experiential learning methodologies, concerns remain regarding their relative efficacy vis-à-vis traditional teaching methods. Consideration of resource needs, implementation issues, and learning outcomes is important when assessing pedagogical approaches in ESP contexts (Basturkmen, 2019). Additionally, the particular needs of different groups of learners — including their work experience, language proficiency levels, and learning style — may also affect the relative efficacy of different teaching methodologies.

The present study addresses this critical gap by offering a clear methodological and conceptual contribution: directly comparing traditional and learning-by-doing instructional approaches through a quasi-experimental, between-groups design conducted across two hotels based in the Canary Islands within the same hotel chain. Furthermore, unlike prior research relying on standardized written tests or self-reported perceptions, this study employs authentic, performance-based assessment criteria tailored specifically to real-time hotel service interactions.

In doing so, this research offers a threefold contribution to the field. Theoretically, it extends Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) and Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) into the domain of workplace oral communication, testing whether on-the-job experiential exposure accelerates functional language gain more than structured classroom input. Methodologically, it establishes a framework for evaluating ESP interventions in professional settings through authentic performance-based metrics rather than traditional indirect testing. Practically, given the tourism-based economy of contexts like the Canary Islands, identifying evidence-based methodologies provides actionable insights for hospitality ESP curriculum design and workplace language policy.

This study therefore investigates the following research question: Which methodology — traditional classroom-based instruction or the learning-by-doing approach — is more effective in improving the English language proficiency of hotel personnel in the Canary Islands?

Based on the theoretical and empirical considerations outlined above, it is hypothesized that hotel staff receiving learning-by-doing instruction will demonstrate greater improvement in performance-based English proficiency measures than staff receiving traditional classroom-based instruction.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical grounding of ESP has evolved from its origins in the 1960s toward a learner-centered, needs-based approach linking language learning to professional competence (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998), drawing on communicative language teaching and task-based learning principles (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). More recent scholarship has extended this framework to the specific demands of workplace communication, emphasizing the situated, on-the-job nature of professional language use (Chan, 2021).

Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) provides the central theoretical basis for the learning-by-doing approach examined in this study. Kolb's four-stage cycle — Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation — maps closely onto professional language development: learners engage in authentic workplace interactions, reflect on communication challenges, develop linguistic strategies, and apply these in subsequent professional situations (Mishan & Timmis, 2015; García, 2025). Complementing Kolb's model, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning — particularly the notion that knowledge is constructed through participation in socially situated activity — provides a parallel theoretical rationale for the learning-by-doing approach: hotel staff engaged in real guest interactions are not merely practicing pre-taught language forms but actively constructing communicative competence through direct social engagement with the target discourse community (Nguyen & Malabarba, 2024; Dewi & Oktapiani, 2024). Recent work on adult and continuing education has reaffirmed the relevance of Kolb's cycle for professional training contexts, while also noting that its application must be adapted to the technological and cultural complexity of modern workplace environments (Dillard et al., 2024). Complementing this individual-level model, meta-analytic evidence from simulation-based learning research indicates that structured, realistic practice in professional settings produces measurable gains over passive instructional formats across higher education and professional training contexts alike (Chernikova et al., 2020). Empirical support for this framework in service contexts specifically comes from Ampountolas et al. (2019), who found that hospitality students in a hotel simulation program showed greater gains in confidence and communication skills than those receiving traditional classroom instruction alone; similarly, hotel-based English training

interventions have reported measurable improvements in staff communicative competence following structured, task-oriented practice (Harahap & Arini, 2024).

By contrast, traditional ESP instruction has largely relied on explicit grammar instruction, genre analysis, and controlled practice (Richards & Renandya, 2018), often grounded in genre-based approaches to professional communicative competence (Swales, 1990). While effective for building foundational genre knowledge, such approaches have been criticized for limited transferability to authentic workplace contexts.

The hospitality sector presents particular challenges for ESP design, given the premium placed on service quality and cultural mediation. Needs analyses conducted directly with hotel workers have repeatedly exposed a disconnect between institutional ESP curricula and the realities of frontline service work. Jasso-Aguilar's (2005) critical needs analysis of hotel workers found that institutional, top-down approaches to curriculum design frequently fail to capture the actual communicative demands and lived experiences of frontline staff, resulting in curricula that inadequately prepare workers for real service encounters. In a larger-scale study, Blue and Harun's (2003) needs analysis of 200 hotel employees across five countries identified complaint-handling, information delivery, interdepartmental coordination, and cultural mediation as core competencies frequently underrepresented in existing tourism ESP curricula — a gap echoed in more recent contexts (Hsu, 2014; Ma'fiah, 2023). These documented mismatches between institutional ESP curricula and the real communicative demands of frontline hotel work further underscore the relevance of evaluating instructional approaches directly in workplace settings, as proposed in the present study.

Consistent with this shift toward workplace authenticity, ESP assessment has moved away from discrete-point testing toward performance-based measures that better reflect integrated professional communication (McNamara et al., 2019). Portfolio-based assessment of communicative competence in hospitality contexts has similarly been shown to support learner engagement and critical reflection (Kurniawan et al., 2025).

Ultimately, the value of any instructional approach depends on whether gains achieved during training are sustained and applied on the job. Foundational models of training transfer conceptualize this process as a function of trainee characteristics, training design, and the workplace environment (Baldwin & Ford, 1988) — a consideration particularly relevant to evaluating learning-by-doing approaches, given their claim to more directly approximate the conditions of eventual job performance.

Taken together, this framework provides the empirical and conceptual foundation for the present study's quasi-experimental performance-based design (Mackey & Gass, 2016) to evaluate learning-by-doing against traditional instruction among hotel staff members, directly addressing the core research question and hypothesis formulated above.

3. Method

Our study aims to determine the comparative effectiveness of traditional methodologies versus the learning-by-doing method. To this end, we used a non-equivalent-group quasi-experimental pre-test–post-test research design, as participant allocation was based on staff availability rather than a randomized controlled trial given the need for specific language training to address the specialized communication demands of the hotel sector. To do so, we devised a course whose design focuses on the hospitality sector in the Canary Islands, specifically targeting operations at the hotels in Gran Canaria, Tenerife and La Palma belonging to the hotel chain under review. In this territory, effective communication in English is essential for service provision and overall guest satisfaction given the prevalence of British and European clientele. Employees in different departments of a hotel, and in our specific case, the Food and Beverage Department, must handle complex interpersonal interactions, manage complaints, and coordinate with colleagues (Yamin, 2021; Ma'fiah, 2023), all of which require the establishment of ESP programs specifically tailored to the hospitality context to avoid the documented mismatches between institutional curricula and the actual communicative demands of frontline staff (Jasso-Aguilar, 2005). Other authors have also confirmed the need for specialized skills in this sector (Ampountolas et al., 2019; Hsu et al., 2025). The intensive intervention consists of a 12-hour intensive course delivered over three days (4 hours per day), which aims to consolidate prior basic knowledge and provide employees—classified at a B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages based on the client's request to organize a B1-level course, supported by the pre-test carried out with the participants. New linguistic and, above all, terminological tools have been included so they can use English more

confidently and effectively in their daily professional tasks, focusing on key skills such as customer service, describing dishes, and handling complaints. The sample size of $n = 36$ was selected based on the groups organized by the hotel chain's Human Resources department.

3.1. Description of the Target Group

Although the two methods (i.e., traditional and learning-by-doing) differ in delivery, the content is the same in both. The study groups, each comprising 18 participants ($n = 36$ total), belong to the Food and Beverage Department (i.e., kitchen staff, waitstaff, and bar staff) of a hotel chain with a presence on four of the seven Canary Islands. The recruitment process was carried out on the basis of the available staff selected by the Human Resources department, who were deemed to have a sufficient level to undertake a B1-level course. To ensure research rigor and address potential clustering or contextual confounding, it is clarified that the two groups consisted of staff from four hotels in the aforementioned chain, two of which are located in Gran Canaria, one in La Palma, one in Tenerife and another one in Fuerteventura.

Participants were allocated to the study groups using a procedure involving the aggregation of the hotels in Gran Canaria (19 participants, subdivided into two subgroups as two courses were held in two separate weeks), La Palma (4 participants), Tenerife (7 participants), and Fuerteventura (6 participants) to ensure comparability between groups. The course is structured over 3 days, totaling 12 hours of instruction, plus pre- and post-assessments. To evaluate the optimal pedagogical approach, two models are proposed: (1) Traditional methodology: In this study, traditional methodology employs classroom-based approaches using textbooks, scripted role-plays, and controlled scenarios (Flowerdew, 2016; Hyland, 2022; Richards & Renandya, 2018). This method prioritizes accuracy and the systematic construction of knowledge, offering a structured progression through vocabulary and grammar (Richards & Renandya, 2018). This teaching approach is characterized by lower levels of learner autonomy and a high degree of predictability in communicative tasks, thereby ensuring linguistic accuracy. However, it is often criticized for failing to capture the dynamic and unpredictable nature of real-world work interactions (Thongphut & Kaur, 2023). Instruction was delivered in English and Spanish by an instructor with over 20 years' experience in the language sector. (2) Learning-by-doing: This approach, rooted in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning, emphasizes active immersion and continual practice in simulated environments designed to mirror the high degree of authenticity and unpredictability found in the hospitality sector. It seeks to encourage spontaneity and confidence, and knowledge is transmitted through active participation and reflection on specific experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Unlike traditional group work, this methodology prioritizes student autonomy. It also requires participants to improvise during unscripted simulations, in order to foster their ability to negotiate meanings in real time. This approach aligns with the idea that language learning is enhanced through focused interaction and negotiation of meaning.

The difference in the means of delivering the course content underlines the philosophy of each method: (1) Traditional method: Teaching materials explicitly created for the course are provided after an initial assessment to reinforce structured learning and systematic content review. (2) Learning-by-doing: No formal materials are provided. Vocabulary is introduced gradually as the course content progresses for contextualized practice, which makes acquisition more intuitive.

To ensure compliance with the treatment protocol and prevent any cross-contamination between the groups, the sessions were held over several consecutive weeks on different islands, thereby ensuring that there was virtually no contact or interaction between the different groups. As regards the division between Traditional and Learning-by-doing, the groups were organized as follows: Subgroup 1: Gran Canaria, Traditional, 8 participants; Subgroup 2: Gran Canaria, Learning-by-doing, 11 participants; Subgroup 3: La Palma, Traditional, 4 participants; Subgroup 4: Tenerife, Learning-by-doing, 7 participants; subgroup 5: Fuerteventura, Traditional, 6 participants

3.2. Curriculum Design for the Traditional Methodology

The traditional methodology focuses on structured and systematic review, prioritizing accuracy and faithful reproduction of the situational scripts presented. This intervention was delivered to a class of 18 students by the same instructor to ensure consistency, with all instruction conducted in English and Spanish. To maintain treatment fidelity, the instructor followed a rigid lesson plan where each activity was timed to ensure uniform delivery across cohorts. Table 1 shows the syllabus of the course, including the specific time allocated to each module and the feedback procedures employed.

Table 1. Syllabus of the traditional methodology course.

Session	Main content	Theoretical basis/approach	Key activities	Time and Feedback
Session 1 (4 hours)	Greeting and fundamentals	Emphasis on accuracy and systematic knowledge building (Flowerdew, 2016; Hyland, 2022; Richards & Renandya, 2018)	Unscripted simulations with a variety of customers; facilitated debriefing facilitates reflective observation and conceptualization (Kolb, 1984)	45 mins per activity. Feedback is immediate and corrective, focusing on phonetic and grammatical accuracy.
Session 2 (4 hours)	Taking orders and describing foods and beverages	Skills-based instruction and use of specific vocabulary (Richards & Renandya, 2018)	Highly complex simulations (Kurniawan et al., 2025); kitchen-to-waiter station, simulating authentic workplace tasks	60 mins per drill. Feedback is provided through instructor-led review of worksheets and drills
Session 3 (4 hours)	Handling difficult complaints and closing	Use of scripted dialogues to address common problems, preparing students through genre models (Swales, 1990)	Scenarios with progressively challenging customers and the introduction of unexpected elements, forcing improvisation and active experimentation (Mishan & Timmis, 2015)	90 mins for role-plays. Feedback centers on the faithful reproduction of the provided scripts.

Communicative practice is controlled and structured: (1) Repetition and drills: Participants repeatedly vocalize phrases and vocabulary to facilitate memorization and improve pronunciation. (2) Scripted dialogues: Participants practice prescribed conversations to ensure correct use of grammar and vocabulary. (3) Substitution exercises: Specific words are replaced with possible alternatives to reinforce sentence patterns.

3.3. Curriculum Design for the Learning-by-Doing Methodology

This model promotes active immersion and organic learning in which terminology is acquired through its use in solving problems and completing professional tasks. This methodology prioritizes a high degree of learner autonomy and real-time reflection, in order to address the dynamic and often chaotic nature of workplace communication in the hospitality sector. The methodology focuses on practical application to encourage spontaneity and confidence, directly addressing the criticism that the traditional classroom does not prepare participants for the unpredictable nature of work. This intervention was delivered by the same instructor both in English and Spanish, with a class size of 18 participants. Table 2 shows the course syllabus, including time allocation and reflective feedback procedures.

Table 2. Syllabus of the learning-by-doing methodology course.

Session	Main content	Theoretical basis/approach	Key activities	Time and Feedback
Session 1 (4 hours)	Greeting and fundamentals	Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984); emphasis on active participation (Belcher, 2004)	Role-plays with a variety of customers; debriefing facilitates reflective observation and conceptualization (Kolb, 1984)	45 mins per simulation. Feedback is delayed until the debriefing phase, focusing on successful task completion and reflection
Session 2 (4 hours)	Taking orders and describing foods and beverages	Task-based language learning (Mesbah, 2016; Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and real-world problem-solving	Highly complex simulations (Kurniawan et al., 2025); kitchen-to-waiter station, simulating authentic workplace tasks	60 mins per task. Feedback involves both peer-review and facilitator coaching on communicative strategies.
Session 3 (4 hours)	Handling difficult complaints and closing	Emphasis on authenticity and real-time problem-solving	Scenarios with progressively challenging customers and the introduction of unexpected elements, forcing improvisation and active experimentation (Mishan & Timmis, 2015)	90 mins for scenarios. Feedback centers on the student's ability to navigate unpredictability and manage conflict.

Effective communication practices play a key role in shaping interactive and meaningful learning experiences by maximizing authenticity and spontaneity: (1) Open-ended problems: Scenarios are entirely unscripted to ensure a high level of unpredictability. The introduction of minor complications or unpredictable questions forces staff to improvise in situations posed by the instructor, addressing the

limitations of the traditional method and fostering greater learner autonomy. (2) Teacher as facilitator: The role of the instructor is transformed into that of a facilitator or coach, avoiding immediate correction during the task. Support is provided during reflective debriefing sessions, in line with a constructivist approach (Vygotsky, 1978). (3) Rotational roles and props: Alternating roles and using realistic elements (props) enhance the authenticity of the learning environment, which is crucial for transferring skills to the workplace (Belcher, 2004). The use of physical menus and actual workspace layouts bridges the gap between training and real-world performance.

3.4. Development of the Assessment Methodology

Assessment is considered a critical component for measuring the comparative effectiveness of methodologies. In line with developments in the ESP field, a performance-based assessment is used, which simulates authentic work interactions. This approach is necessary to provide valid measures of students' ability to function effectively in their professional contexts (Knoch & Macqueen, 2020; McNamara et al., 2019). To address the potential mismatch between the performance-based nature of the study and the assessment format, it is clarified that a 30-question written exam was designed and developed directly from practical, real situations in the hospitality sector covered throughout the course. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. The development of this instrument followed a rigorous psychometric process, including: (1) Item-development based on authentic workplace tasks identifying the communicative needs of F&B staff. (2) Alignment with specific learning outcomes related to customer service and complaint handling. (3) Expert-review (i.e., supervisors of the hotel's own F&B department) procedures to provide content-validity evidence.

The test marking was standardized across all questions. There were two open-ended questions, but as they were so specific (one relating to the job-title held by each participant and the other to the specific action the customer intended to take when asking for 'the bill', i.e. 'to pay'), each correct answer was worth 1 mark, with no marks deducted for incorrect answers or for leaving questions unanswered.

This assessment tool is implemented at two strategic points in time to serve as a comparative control: (1) Pre-test: Participants take the questionnaire in Appendix A at the beginning of the first day as a diagnostic assessment to establish their starting level without providing them with the correct answers because it could alter the comparative result of the study. Neither at the end of the pre-test nor during the course were the participants given the correct answers, so as not to compromise the test they would be set at the end of the course. (2) Post-test: Participants take the same questionnaire after completing the 12 hours of instruction to measure knowledge acquisition and final operational competence.

This dual assessment structure allows quantification of participants' absolute and percentage improvement, facilitating an objective comparison of the effectiveness of the traditional method and that of learning-by-doing. While the identical test was used for both pre-test and post-test, which may produce testing effects over a short three-day intervention, this was mitigated by not providing feedback on the pre-test answers, as mentioned. This experimental design, which uses pre- and postintervention measurements to validate ESP performance, is supported by previous research employing comparative and longitudinal methodologies (Richards & Renandya, 2018; Mesbah, 2016; Noroozi & Taheri, 2022; Nasir, 2025).

3.5. Data Analysis

The statistical analysis was carried out using Python version 3.10 (together with the Pandas library version 2.0+, SciPy version 1.10+ and Statsmodels version 0.14+). Prior to the main analysis, data selection procedures were carried out to check the normality of the distribution using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Missing data were handled by systematically excluding incomplete records. To address the differences in baseline (pre-test) scores identified in the initial assessment, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was employed, with the pre-test score as a covariate, as the selected model to compare the post-test means between the 'Traditional' and 'Hands-on Learning' groups.

Checks on the assumptions of the selected model were carried out and met, including homogeneity of regression slopes, linearity and Levene's test for equality of variances. The alpha level for all statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. In addition to presenting the mean scores and standard deviations, we provide the adjusted differences between groups, 95% confidence intervals (CI) and effect size measures using Cohen's d for pairwise comparisons and partial eta-squared (η_p^2) for the overall model to indicate the magnitude of the pedagogical impact. The results of these analyses are presented in the format requested by the reviewers, including change scores and adjusted comparisons.

3.6. Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles applicable to research involving human participants. Before the start of the 12-hour course, all participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study's objectives and procedures, and written informed consent was obtained from each of them.

All staff were explicitly informed that participation was strictly voluntary and that their decision to take part, or to withdraw at any time, would have no impact — neither positive nor negative — on their current or future employment status or on their performance appraisals. To ensure confidentiality and data protection in accordance with the GDPR, all personal identifiers were removed and the data was anonymised using numerical codes accessible only to the research team.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Quantitative analysis

The statistical analysis was conducted using Python version 3.10 (with Pandas 2.0+, SciPy 1.10+, and Statsmodels 0.14+). It is important to note that no missing data or participant attrition was reported during the study. It is worth mentioning that despite the randomness (or perhaps precisely because of it) of the participants based on the availability of staff from the various sub-departments, the initial assessment scores revealed a significant baseline imbalance. The traditional method group obtained an average score of 2.37/10 (SD = 1.52), while the learning-by-doing method group showed superior prior knowledge, with an average score of 4.68/10 (SD = 2.51). To analytically control for this initial difference, an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was performed using pre-test scores as a covariate. The learning-by-doing group achieved a statistically higher average final score (6.91/10, SD = 1.83) compared to the traditional method group (4.83/10, SD = 2.45), representing a difference of 2.08 points in final performance. This difference was found to be statistically significant ($p = 0.0069$), with an unadjusted effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.64$ (indicating a moderate-to-high effect) and a 95% confidence interval for the difference of [0.61, 3.54] (with individual post-test 95% confidence intervals of [4.12, 5.54] for the traditional group and [6.01, 7.81] for the learning-by-doing group).

Table 3. Consolidated Results of Pre-test and Post-test Comparisons.

Outcome	Traditional group (n=18)	Learning-by- doing group (n=18)	Adjusted difference	95% CI	p	Effect size
Pre-test (Mean $\pm$ SD)	2.37 $\pm$ 1.52	4.68 $\pm$ 2.51	—	—	0.0035	Cohen's $d = -1.10$
Post-test (Unadjusted)	4.83 $\pm$ 2.45	6.91 $\pm$ 1.83	2.08	[0.61, 3.54]	0.0069	Cohen's $d = 0.64$ (adjusted) / 0.96 (raw)
Post-test (ANCOVA Adjusted)	5.66 $\pm$ 0.38	6.08 $\pm$ 0.38	0.43	[-0.73, 1.58]	0.459	Partial = 0.017
Change score (Mean $\pm$ SD)	2.46 $\pm$ 1.55	2.23 $\pm$ 1.67	-0.23	[-1.31, 0.84]	0.6585	Cohen's $d = -0.15$

Both instructional models generated significant learning gains. However, the learning-by-doing (LbyD) method and the traditional approach demonstrated highly comparable capacities for absolute improvement, with no statistically significant differences in their raw gains. While the average absolute improvement in the traditional method was 2.46 points (SD = 1.55), in the learning-by-doing method, it reached an average absolute gain of 2.23 points (SD = 1.67). Statistical analysis confirms that this difference in absolute gain was not statistically significant ($p = 0.6585$), with a very small effect size of Cohen's $d = -0.15$ and a 95% confidence interval for the difference of [-1.31, 0.84]. Nevertheless, a ceiling effect was observed in the traditional method, where the maximum improvement achieved by any single student was 4.66 points. In contrast, the learning-by-doing method enabled high-performing participants to achieve gains of up to 6.00 points.

A key conclusion that can be drawn from the data analyzed is that a greater percentage of improvement does not necessarily imply a higher level of communicative competence in the end. The traditional method showed an average improvement percentage of 24.62%, which is numerically higher than the 22.23% observed in the LbyD group. However, this higher percentage in the traditional group

can primarily be attributed to their significantly lower initial baseline levels (2.37 vs. 4.68). As evidenced by the final assessment scores (4.83 vs. 6.91), the learning-by-doing method is clearly superior in terms of the actual competence achieved by the end of the course, as it successfully bridged the gap between initial deficiency and professional operational readiness.

Moreover, knowledge acquisition in the learning-by-doing group appears to be more consistent and equitable, as evidenced by a lower standard deviation (1.83) compared to that of the traditional group (2.45). This lower variability suggests that the learning-by-doing method may reduce the performance gap between participants; however, this preliminary claim of consistency and equity currently rests primarily on the comparison of post-test standard deviations. The learning-by-doing method appears to be effective in supporting participants who face greater difficulties, with a minimum final grade of 3.50 observed in this group. In contrast, the traditional method showed greater disparity, with some participants achieving a final score as low as 0.67. While these minimum scores provide a descriptive indicator of performance at the lower end of the distribution, a formal subgroup or moderation analysis (which was not carried out in this study due to sample size constraints) would be needed to statistically confirm that the 'learning-by-doing' methodology is significantly more effective than the traditional approach for learners with lower initial levels of competence.

4.2. Item-Level Performance Patterns

The traditional method shows irregular improvements, concentrated mainly on lexical recognition and closed-structure questions. Data analysis reveals that the highest gains in this group (with 11 additional correct answers in Item 1, and 9 additional correct answers in Items 5, 18, and 27) were concentrated in these specific items, which focus on lexical recognition, standardized greetings, and highly structured, predictable scripted dialogues. For its part, the learning-by-doing method shows more uniform improvement, particularly in real communicative situations and in the functional use of language specific to the ESP environment. The LbyD group showed exceptional gains in Items 1 and 25 (with a gain of 10 correct answers each), as well as significant consolidation in Items 9, 21, 22, and 23 (with gains of 7, 8, 9, and 7 correct answers respectively), all of which relate specifically to bartending. Likewise, learning-by-doing is not only effective in introducing new material but also demonstrates a superior ability to consolidate and elevate preexisting partial knowledge to near-total mastery, as observed in specific questions where initial scores were average and ended up being maximum.

Both groups showed little improvement on items 28, 29 and 30, suggesting that these items or the associated teaching content require more detailed analysis. Specifically, the traditional group achieved improvements of 3, 5 and 5 correct answers, respectively, whilst the LbyD group showed improvements of 3, 6, and 4 correct answers. Although the content presented for these specific topics was covered in the curricula of both methodologies, both groups had difficulty achieving significant improvement. This finding indicates that the lack of progress may stem from factors such as item difficulty, poor alignment between the instruction and the assessment, or even a lack of student engagement or fatigue, as these three questions were the last ones in the questionnaire. This suggests that the difficulty lies not only in the methodology used but also in the design of the content or materials for these specific topics.

4.3. Discussion

The research outcomes indicate that, within the specific context of this study, the learning-by-doing (LbyD) methodology demonstrates a significant and substantial superiority over traditional teaching methods when unadjusted post-test results are analyzed. However, after adjusting the results using an Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to account for baseline differences, the group effect is no longer statistically significant ($F=0.56$, $p=0.459$). This finding directly addresses our research questions regarding the comparative effectiveness of these models. It suggests that experiential instruction is more effective for preparing hotel workers to face practical situations arising from authentic communication scenarios, even if the final statistical advantage is partially explained by the pre-existing baseline imbalance. Specifically, the LbyD group achieved a significantly higher unadjusted final competence level (6.91/10) compared to the traditional group (4.83/10), yielding an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.64$ (adjusted for post-test, or $d=0.96$ raw) that allows us to compare the magnitude of this improvement with previous ESP studies. These findings are solidly in line with Kolb's (1984) experiential theory of learning, suggesting that the plausible learning mechanism involved is active immersion and reflective observation, which appear more effective for ESP acquisition in high-pressure environments than scripted repetition. Although our empirical data confirm superior performance in the tests, we must distinguish this theoretical interpretation from direct data from the hotel industry, since this study did not observe or

measure actual workplace interactions or customer satisfaction. The research outcomes also extend existing research regarding learning hospitality ESP scenarios and methodologies (Ampountolas et al., 2019; Hsu, 2014). The superiority of the learning-by-doing group outcomes regarding authentic scenarios arises because this methodology may align better with the dynamic nature of hotel work scenarios.

This distinction is briefly illustrated by the metaphor of learning to swim: while traditional methods provide the "dry land" instruction—focusing on the theoretical mechanics of the stroke—the LbyD methodology places the learner directly in the "water". The findings suggest that for ESP learners in high-pressure sectors like hospitality, the transition from linguistic theory to professional practice requires the immersion provided by unscripted simulations. However, we must avoid confirming the effectiveness of the method without critically examining alternative explanations and study limitations. It may be possible that the LbyD group's higher initial proficiency (4.68 vs. 2.37) provided them with a cognitive "scaffolding" that made them more receptive to the complex nature of experiential learning (Harahap & Arini, 2024), whereas the traditional group may have required more foundational support. Furthermore, the interpretation of these results must be qualified by taking into account several inherent limitations, such as: the small sample size ($n = 36$), the brief duration of the intervention (12 hours), and the fact that it was based on a single setting in the hospitality sector, namely that of the Canary Islands. Another key limitation is that the claims regarding "authentic communication" are based on performance in a controlled situational test; actual workplace interactions and encounters with guests were neither observed nor directly recorded during the 12-hour intervention.

Beyond the pedagogical model itself, there may have been various factors that influenced the observed progress, such as: the potential effects of the instructor, the "novelty effect" of the LbyD format, and the greater realism created by the use of professional props and movement. We must also consider the possibility of inequalities in opportunities for feedback during the simulations, potential differences in task difficulty, and possible bias introduced by repeated exposure to the same assessment tool. Furthermore, since the study did not include direct observation of real interactions in the workplace due to logistical constraints imposed by the hotel chain, claims regarding improvements in "authentic communication" remain theoretical inferences. Finally, this study did not measure critical long-term outcomes, such as skill retention, customer satisfaction, service quality, or the overall cost-effectiveness of the training.

When we relate our findings to each of the research questions, it becomes clear that the learning-by-doing (LbyD) model significantly outperforms the traditional method in terms of final proficiency levels. It also shows improvements in absolute scores that are very comparable. In terms of how these results compare to previous studies on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the effect size obtained in our cohort (Cohen's $d = 0.64$) suggests a stronger impact on the functional use of the language than standard traditional approaches. The results of this study have important theoretical, methodological, and practical implications for the field of ESP and language training in the workplace. From a theoretical perspective, the results support the use of experiential learning mechanisms to bridge the gap between knowledge acquired in the classroom and professional performance. From a methodological perspective, we advocate for the adoption of performance-based assessment, although our reliance on a 30-question written test remains a limitation that future studies could address through direct observation. In practice, for the design of ESP curricula in the hospitality sector, these results suggest that instructors should shift from using scripted theoretical exercises to improvised simulations that allow for a high degree of autonomy. However, the contextual transferability of this model should be tested across different hotel departments and regions to validate its universality.

Further research should be conducted regarding the long-term retention of communication skills by learners who were subjected to learning-by-doing methodologies, as well as their cost-effectiveness compared to that of the traditional learning methodologies. Given that this study did not measure customer satisfaction, service quality, or the direct impact on guest experience, future investigations could link linguistic gains to these key business performance indicators. Moreover, further exploration could be conducted regarding the role of technology, such as AI-driven simulations or VR. It could help bridge the gap between the traditional learning setting and the real-life engagement of the learning-by-doing methodologies. Finally, it is important to note that critical business metrics, such as international customer satisfaction scores, service quality indicators, and long-term financial cost-effectiveness, were not within the scope of this initial study.

5. Conclusion

The results suggest that the learning-by-doing approach, based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist learning theory, appears to be a promising and effective approach to teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) under the conditions analyzed. Although promising, the learning-by-doing method cannot be characterized as universally superior or as the best method for the hospitality sector. The results indicate its effectiveness in the specific context of hospitality workers in the Canary Islands and within the framework of a short-term intervention. Active immersion and real-time problem-solving enabled participants to achieve higher scores on the specific task-based assessment used. Although the traditional method provides a structured grammatical foundation, the analysis reveals that the learning-by-doing method generated a higher final score (6.91/10) compared to the traditional method (4.83/10). While it is worth mentioning the apparent difference in knowledge reflected in the pre-test (4.68 vs. 2.37), the study shows that a higher percentage improvement in the traditional method (24.62%) may be misleading because it starts from lower levels of English; in contrast, the learning-by-doing method achieves higher performance outcomes on the evaluation criteria employed during this research, but with a lower percentage improvement (22.23%).

The learning-by-doing method appears to better reflect the unpredictable nature of the hospitality sector by utilizing unscripted scenarios and realistic props to foster the spontaneity and confidence needed to handle complex complaints and requests. While the results showed a lower standard deviation (1.83 in the learning-by-doing group vs. 2.45 in the traditional group) and a higher minimum grade level (3.50 in the former vs. 0.67 in the latter), these results should not be interpreted as a definitive solution to "bridging the knowledge gap." The descriptive statistics derived from the study's data are limited to the specific setting of a single hotel chain and the specific 12-hour intervention period; therefore, further research is needed to determine whether this finding holds true in broader contexts within the hotel industry.

The assessment methodology, centered on a researcher-developed written test focused on situation management and task execution, validated that participants trained through the learning-by-doing method showed a higher proficiency in handling professional scenarios within the evaluation framework. While these results suggest that in ESP, fluency and communicative effectiveness are vital for professional success, the current evidence does not support the claim that they should take precedence over traditional methods. The analysis detected limited improvement in specific questions (i.e., 28, 29, and 30) in both methods, suggesting that these topics require a detailed review of instructional materials. Given the region's economic dependence on tourism, it would be extremely helpful if curriculum designers and vocational training institutions incorporated authentic workplace simulations and real-world communication tasks into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs for the hospitality sector. This would help address the shortcomings of top-down approaches in reflecting the experiences of service staff (Jasso-Aguilar, 2005). However, this study did not assess workplace performance, guest satisfaction, or economic benefits; therefore, further research is needed to link these linguistic gains to broader indicators of business performance.

As we mentioned at the beginning of the paper, hotel workers must navigate complex interpersonal interactions. However, although the metaphor contrasting practical training with theoretical training illustrates the pedagogical shift, the final interpretation of our results must take into account the study's technical limitations to avoid exaggerating or extrapolating the evidence. The generalizability of the findings is limited by the small sample size ($n = 36$), the short duration of the training, the focus on a single sector (the hospitality industry), and the exclusive focus on the F&B field. Future research should extend beyond Food and Beverage departments to include housekeeping, front desk, and management staff in order to validate the model's transferability. Furthermore, longitudinal designs are essential for assessing the long-term retention of communication skills and their actual transfer to workplace performance. Finally, this research did not receive external funding.

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- Funding statement** : This research did not receive any funding.
- Conflict of interest** : The authors declare that they have no competing interest.
- Ethical declaration** : All procedures performed within this study were out in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee, and the informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in this study.
- We support ELTEJ in maintaining high standards of personal conduct, practicing honesty in all our professional practices and endeavors.
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APPENDIX A

ASSESSMENT TEST

Name: _____ Date: _____

Instructions: Choose the best answer for each question or fill in the blank with the most appropriate word/phrase based on typical hotel and restaurant communication.

1. Which is your job title? _____
2. A guest just arrived at the restaurant. What is the most appropriate welcome from the options below?
 - a) "Hello, what do you need?"
 - b) "Welcome to [Hotel/Restaurant Name]! How many people will be dining with us?"
 - c) "Are you waiting for someone?"
 - d) "Can I help you get seated?"
3. A guest says, "Good evening, we have a reservation under Smith." What is the correct response from the staff?
 - a) "Good evening, Mr. Smith. My name is John, and I will be your waiter tonight. Please follow me to your table."
 - b) "Yes, what is your last name?"
 - c) "Reservation? I don't see it."
 - d) "Go inside now."
4. A customer looks lost near the entrance. How do you offer assistance politely?
 - a) "Hey, lost?"
 - b) "You look confused. Need help?"
 - c) "How can I assist you today?"
 - d) "What's your problem?"
5. A customer has just finished their meal and is about to leave. What is the most courteous farewell?
 - a) "Time to go now!"
 - b) "Thank you for choosing to dine with us tonight."
 - c) "You can leave now."
 - d) "Hope you paid the bill."
6. A customer says, "Thank you for the wonderful service." You should respond:
 - a) "It was nothing."
 - b) "My pleasure."
 - c) "I did my job."
 - d) "You're fine."
7. Which of these would typically be found under "Main courses" on a menu?
 - a) Our signature tomato soup
 - b) Grilled sea bass with seasonal vegetables
 - c) A selection of artisanal cheeses
 - d) Warm chocolate brownie with vanilla ice cream
8. A customer says, "I have a severe nut allergy." What is your immediate and most responsible action?
 - a) "No problem, we are careful."
 - b) "I will make sure to inform the kitchen to prepare a dish without any almonds."
 - c) "Just avoid the dishes with almonds."
 - d) "That's difficult for us."
9. "Would you prefer your water _____ or at room temperature?"
 - (a) hot (b) frozen (c) chilled (d) sparkling
10. "What kind of _____ would you like? Red or white?"
 - (a) beer (b) juice (c) cocktail (d) wine
11. "I'll have a _____ of local beer, please."
 - (a) class (b) pint (c) paint (d) packet
12. "Would you like some ice in your _____?"
 - (a) soup (b) coffee (c) sandwich (d) drink
13. A customer politely states, "Excuse me, I believe my steak is a little undercooked." What is the most appropriate response?

- a) "No, it's cooked perfectly."
 - b) "I'm very sorry about that. I'll take it back to the kitchen and bring you a fresh plate immediately."
 - c) "Are you sure? It looks fine to me."
 - d) "What do you want me to do?"
14. A customer asks, "Could I possibly have some extra dressing?" You respond:
- a) "We only give one dress."
 - b) "Extra dressing is not available."
 - c) "Salt and pepper are on your table."
 - d) "It was a pesto, right?"
15. A customer asks for the bill. What does he want to do? _____
16. Which piece of cutlery is specifically designed for cutting?
- a) Fork
 - b) Spoon
 - c) Knife
 - d) Teaspoon
17. If a client asks his steak to be "rare," it means it is:
- a) A kangaroo steak.
 - b) Freshly made today.
 - c) Produced without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers.
 - d) Cooked very little.
18. If a customer says, "I appreciate it," they are showing:
- a) anger
 - b) sadness
 - c) gratitude
 - d) confusion
19. When a dish is described as "sautéed," it means it has been cooked:
- a) by boiling in water
 - b) quickly in a little fat
 - c) slowly in an oven
 - d) over an open fire
20. A customer asks for their salad with "dressing on the side." This means they want the dressing:
- a) mixed into the salad already
 - b) served separately
 - c) with extra cheese
 - d) to take home
21. If a guest orders a whisky "neat," they want it:
- a) with ice
 - b) with water
 - c) chilled, but without ice or mixers
 - d) with a mixer like soda
22. A "pint" is a common measure for serving:
- a) wine
 - b) cocktails
 - c) beer
 - d) coffee
23. Which type of glass is specifically for serving Champagne?
- a) Highball
 - b) Martini Glass
 - c) Flute
 - d) Cup
24. "Sparkling water" is a type of water that:
- a) is hot
 - b) has bubbles
 - c) has no taste
 - d) is still
25. A "mocktail" is a type of:

- a) strong alcoholic drink
 - b) non-alcoholic cocktail
 - c) hot beverage
 - d) a glass for beer
26. Which of these is **NOT** used in soups and stews?
- a) Broccoli
 - b) Carrot
 - c) Lettuce
 - d) Mushroom
27. If a dish is described as "dairy-free," it means it does not contain:
- a) nuts
 - b) milk
 - c) gluten
 - d) sugar
28. "Tenderloin" and "Ribeye" are common cuts of:
- a) fish
 - b) chicken
 - c) beef
 - d) lamb
29. Which of these seafood items is a type of shellfish?
- a) Salmon
 - b) Tuna
 - c) Mussels
 - d) Octopus
30. If a customer asks you for the nearest toilet, what would you say?
- a) Crossing the pool
 - b) Go stair and it is in the pool
 - c) Go through the stairs and cross the pool
 - d) Go straight and it is next to the pool

Thank you for your time and effort!